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SUBJECT: THE HEAT IS ON: KEY RACES TO WATCH IN CHILE'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

REF: SANTIAGO 950

¶1. Summary. With thousands of seats being filled in this weekend's municipal elections, results can be interpreted in many different ways. One of the principal metrics that pundits will analyze are the outcomes of mayoral races in key districts, known as "emblematic communes". Of the communes considered bellwethers due to population size or potential to change hands between the governing coalition Concertacion and opposition Alianza, the very close race in Santiago between the Concertacion candidate and a popular Alianza mayor from a neighboring commune is the most important of all. End Summary.

Chilean Local Elections 101

¶2. Chile's rather unusual electoral system reflects the nation's statist underpinnings: elections for all city council and mayoral seats in the country are held on the same day. Voting is mandatory for registered voters, and those who fail to vote may be fined. Voters--who cast ballots in gender-segregated voting booths--will vote for one mayoral and one city council candidate. Voters' decisions about mayoral candidates are often driven by the personalities of the candidates themselves. In contrast, party membership plays a key role in voting for city council members, who are generally less well known. In fact, split ballot voting is quite common in municipal elections, with some voters casting ballots for candidates on opposite ends of the political spectrum.

¶3. Two different systems govern the mayoral and city council electoral processes. The mayoral system is quite straightforward--the candidate with the most votes wins. City council is a bit more complex. City council positions are allocated to coalitions following the D'Hondt proportional representation method. After the number of seats to be allocated to each party in the commune is decided, the specific individuals who have been elected are determined by the number of votes each individual received relative to other candidates from his party.

How Do You Measure Success?

¶4. With thousands of seats to be filled in a single weekend, it's no simple task to interpret the election results. However, analysts typically agree that there are three key factors to watch. Because party loyalty plays a larger role in city council elections than in mayoral elections, the percentage of total votes cast nationwide for each of the parties/coalitions is generally seen as the most important factor in determining each party's strength (see reftel). Other key factors are the number of city council members and mayors elected from each party, the percentage of the votes for mayors won by each party, and the outcome of mayoral races in "emblematic communes".

What Makes a Commune "Emblematic"?

¶5. Despite lots of discussion in the press and among pundits about

"emblematic communes", it can be hard to pin down which of Chile's 345 communes are emblematic and why. With 80% of the country's electoral population concentrated in just 66 communes, population is certainly a key factor. The conservative Alianza coalition currently holds the mayoral seats in six of the ten most populous communes in the country. Alfredo Joignant, an academic, political commentator, and Socialist Party member, told Poloff Oct. 22 that he believes Concertacion could reverse this statistic in the October 26 election--a significant victory if it occurs. Other communes gain prominence because of the stature of the candidates, possibility for an upset, or a closely contested race.

Key Races to Watch

16. Here's a sampling of some of the key races in this year's municipal election:

--Santiago: Described as "the mother of all battles" in the press, the race between Concertacion candidate Jaime Ravinet (Christian Democrat, or DC) and mayor of La Florida Pablo Zalaquett (Democratic Union, or UDI) promises to have a photo finish. Although Ravinet, former Minister of Housing and Defense and former mayor of Santiago, started with a great advantage, Zalaquett has considerably shortened the distance between himself and Ravinet, with some polls now showing the two candidates as nearly tied. A key factor will be the percentage of votes that the other candidates--Ricardo Israel (Regional Independent, or PRI) and Miguel Hernandez (Communist Party, or PC)--receive, most likely about 10 percent. Many feel that these votes will damage Ravinet's chances, but Zalaquett's poor performance in a radio debate with the former Minister last Saturday will count against him. (Note: The commune of Santiago includes the central area of Santiago, but is just one of many communes in

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the city and metropolitan region of Santiago. End Note.)

--La Florida: One of most populated municipal districts in the city of Santiago, La Florida houses a large portion of the city's lower middle class. Pablo Zalaquett's decision to run for mayor of Santiago rather than run for re-election in La Florida left Alianza without a natural candidate. Many conservatives feared that Alianza might lose the seat. After some tight negotiations, Alianza named current mayor of Estacion Central Gustavo Hasbun as their candidate.

Hasbun runs against the Socialist candidate Jorge Gajardo. Analysts will also be looking to see how Concertacion performs in Santiago area communes in comparison to the rest of the country. If Concertacion can hold its own in the Santiago area, it will be an indication that public frustration over Transantiago has not yet translated into a lack of electoral support.

--Concepcion: Incumbent Jacqueline van Rysselberghe (UDI) is strongly favored to win the mayoral race in Chile's second largest city. She is looking to increase the high number of votes she received in the last municipal elections and potentially become a nationwide public figure, perhaps even a future presidential candidate. Knowing that their candidate has little chance of success in this election, Concertacion hopes that their electoral agreement with the Communists will allow the Socialist candidate, former mayor Ariel Ulloa, to be groomed for the next congressional elections or for a position in government.

--Iquique: Former mayor Jorge Soria (Independent) had been in office since the return of democracy in 1990 but was recently removed from office for misuse of funds. His son Mauricio Soria (Independent) is running against UDI candidate Mirtha Dubost, who is supported by former DC Intendente (centrally appointed regional governor) and Diputada Antonella Sciaraffia. The Concertacion candidate Patricia Perez (Socialist Party, or PS) doesn't have much of a chance. Roxana Vigueras (former PS) is representing Juntos Podemos, a coalition of Communists, Humanists, Greens and other small parties on the left.

--Valparaiso: Mayor Aldo Cornejo (DC) is up for reelection. He is trying to gain the support of Juntos Podemos in his tight battle against UDI candidate Jorge Castro, a well-known personality with

his own radio show. However, Juntos Podemos has its own candidate, Ivan Vuskovic. Concertacion, aware of the difficult situation, has also intensified support of Cornejo by its public figures.

-- Antofagasta: Former Intendente Marcela Hernando (former Party for Democracy, or PPD, now running as an independent) is taking on acting mayor Christian Democrat candidate Gonzalo Dantaganan. Remarkably, Hernando has been endorsed by the DC, Alianza, and conservative presidential candidate Sebastian Pinera. However, her high popularity has dropped a bit over the past few weeks in favor of Dantaganan, who had been acting mayor since the previous mayor was removed due to accusations of corruption.

--Talca: Alexis Sepulveda (Social Radical, or PRSD) is the first social radical candidate chosen to represent the Concertacion in this city. When a local poll showed Sepulveda one point below National Renewal (RN) candidate Juan Castro, Concertacion officials asked Juntos Podemos candidate Roberto Celedon to pull out of the race but he refused. The risk of losing Talca is well known, so former presidents Lagos and Frei and presidential candidate Jose Miguel Insulza have all come out to support Sepulveda on the campaign trail.

--Temuco: Concertacion candidate Ricardo Celis (PPD) is fighting to hold onto the office that has been in Concertacion's (DC's) hands since 1992. He has received a lot of resistance from outgoing mayor Francisco Huenchumilla (DC) who is not running because he plans to run for Senate in 2009. Celis' opponent Miguel Becker (RN) is running again after obtaining 40% of the votes in 2004 with the hope that he will win the hearts of unhappy DC voters.

[17](#). Comment: With so many different outcomes to track, Chile's political parties have unlimited possibilities for spinning the outcome of Sunday's elections. Mayoral victories in key communes--and above all, in the commune of Santiago--are important both symbolically and practically in the Chilean political system. End Comment.